

**F.A.M.E. II November 2006**  
**Jan van Eyck 1380-1441**

**“The Marriage of Giovanni Arnolfini and his Bride”**  
*costume: in the FAME carton, green robe with fur trim*

**Introduction: A wedding**

Have you ever been to a wedding? What color does the bride usually wear? What does the groom usually wear? Where do people usually get married? Today you are invited to a wedding that took place over 600 years ago. Do you think weddings were a little different then? Try to visualize in your mind what the wedding looks like while we talk about the period of time our artist lived.

**Bubonic Plague to the Renaissance**

During the 1300's a terrible disease called the bubonic plague swept over Europe. This deadly sickness lasted over 100 years and killed more than one third of the people living in Europe. It was a disease carried by fleas on rats that had no known cure. It was especially scary, because people of that time did not understand how it spread and they always live in fear of the plague. The bubonic plague never reached America – why? (Europeans did not settle in America until 1492.)

The people living in Europe were very depressed and saddened by the death all around them. They had little hope for the future. What would you do to make yourself happy if you had survived the “Black Death”? Think of happy, positive activities. The people of this period began experimenting with new methods of expressing themselves through art, music, literature, and poetry. This period of time is called the Renaissance.

Renaissance is a French word, which means rebirth or revival. After a dark period of death, the people began to discover new and great things. Do you know what the period of time is called that we live in today? (Age of Technology).

The Renaissance period is the oldest period of art and music that we student in F.A.M.E. It took place over 600 years ago. It was a time of escape from the Dark or Middle Ages. During this period, the church was the unifying force and it dominated the lives and thoughts of many people. The church had a measure of control over art as well. But during the Renaissance, people began to realize the importance of individual expression as well. This was a period of vigorous artistic and intellectual activity. Jan van Eyck painted during this time of new growth.

**Biography: Jan van Eyck**

Jan (yawn) van Eyck was Flemish, which means he grew up in Belgium. He had an older brother Hubert who was also a gifted painter. Hubert taught Jan so well that it is very difficult to tell their work apart.

We know very little about van Eyck. He was born in the late 1300's. He married a woman named Margaraetha and records indicate they had at least one son and one daughter, although there were no children at the time of their death.

Artists typically were employed either by the church or royalty. Jan van Eyck spent most of his life working under Philip III, Duke of Burgundy (also known as "Philip the Good"). He traveled with the Duke and had a special talent for remembering details of the places he visited. He became a close member of the duke's court and undertook several secret missions for him, including a trip (1428-29) to Spain and Portugal in connection with negotiations that resulted in the marriage (1430) of Philip of Burgundy and Isabella of Portugal. He signed and dated a number of paintings between 1432 and 1439, all of which are painted in oil and varnished – a total of nine signed paintings are in existence today, although other unsigned works are attributed to him. (The practice of signing and dating paintings was not common during that time period). According to documents, he was buried on July 9, 1441.

### **Painting:**

#### **"The Marriage of Giovanni Arnolfini and his Bride"**

Does this look like the wedding you went to? What is different? How do we know it is a wedding? Where are these people? Who are these people?

**Subject:** This is a wedding portrait of a Medici banker, Giovanni Arnolfini, for whom van Eyck painted for many times. The original painting is only slightly larger than this print (32 ¼ x 23 ½ inches).

Do you think the couple is wealthy? (yes, fine attire, fur linings, silks)

*Do you think the bride is beautiful? Large foreheads were thought to be a symbol of beauty since the queen had an extremely large forehead (visual aid: poster which shows what was considered beautiful in the 1300's/1400's)*

Some children may ask if she is pregnant. Her apparel is very heavy and fur-lined, and as she gathers it, it is quite bulky which makes her look "pregnant".

**Style: Descriptive realism** reflected the thought that God created all, so that all in the world was equally important. Jan van Eyck took as much care in painting a bedcover or an orange as he did in portraying a human face. Notice the detail in this painting. If we were in the wedding chamber, we would not even notice the obsessive detail shown in this painting. (*Uneven grain of the floorboards, the differences of texture and springiness between the dog's hair and the fur of Arnolfini's robe, the mirror, chandelier*)

**Detail:** Look at the mirror hanging on the wall of the pictures. It shows the reflection of the couple as well as two figures that were witnesses to the wedding. At this time a priest was not required for the marriage ceremony. You can see Jan van Eyck as the witness in

blue. If you examine the outside of the mirror you can see ten small round miniature paintings of the Passion of Christ (executed in exquisite detail). Over the mirror is inscribed “Jan van Eyck was here”. *(There are several 8 x 10 sheets that show the detail of the mirror and inscription to pass around the classroom).*

**Symbolism:** There are many religious symbols in this painting. van Eyck’s attitude toward nature was that he regarded each created thing as a symbol of God’s work. The fruit on the windowsill represents the Adam and Eve and their fall from grace, as well as the couple will be “fruitful” and blessed with children. The dog represents a symbol of faithfulness in the marriage. The removed shoes show the holiness of the wedding ceremony, “standing on sacred ground”, like Moses before God.

**Light and Color:** Can you tell from some of the detail, what time of year this wedding took place? (Winter. Look at the heavy materials in clothing, the drapes and note the cool winter light from the window washing the bride’s face, half of the groom’s face, and creating a shadow on the velvet bed cover).

Is there another light source that accents the shoes at the far left?

What kind of feeling do you get from the kinds of colors van Eyck used?

**Texture:** Jan van Eyck’s use of texture was obsessive and unique for the period. What items do you see in the painting that adds texture? (Floorboards, dog’s fur, brass, fruit, broom, bed cover, etc. *There are several copies of the dog to pass around for students to examine more closely).*

**Oil Paints:** Jan van Eyck is credited with inventing oil paint, which is not true. What he did do is develop a process, which allowed him to render details and ranges of texture and colors that previously were though impossible to create. He used very clear oils and mixed it with paint powder that he ground himself. The colors were then applied slowly; they were built up on the canvas over time. He would allow one color to dry and then apply the next color and so on, varying the shades as he went so that one color would glow through another – thus creating the visual depth in his work.

When you are overcome with so much detail, you might cry: “Yikes, it’s a van Eyck!”

*Art Project: Demonstrate the importance of texture in painting. There are three dog outlines on a sheet of paper. Dog 1: trace outline. Dog 2: trace outline and color. Dog 3: use line, color and texture. There is a visual of the project to help students understand how lines add texture to a drawing.*